

Beyond Doctrine: Boko Haram, Radical Islamist Insurgency, and the Nigerian State.

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on Wiktorowicz's social movement approach to Islamist activism and complemented by the concepts of symbolic politics and fragmentation of authority articulated by Piscatori and Eickelman, this study moves beyond theological reductionism to situate radical Islamist insurgency within broader patterns of political competition in multi-religious polities. Focusing on Boko Haram in Nigeria, the paper challenges explanations that portray the movement primarily as a product of doctrinal extremism. Instead, it argues that Boko Haram can be better understood as a social movement insurgency engaged in struggles over legitimacy, governance, and material control. Through religious framing, resource mobilization, and the exploitation of political opportunity structures created by governance failures, the group seeks to construct forms of authority that rival the Nigerian state in areas of weak institutional presence. Using a qualitative case study based on secondary literature and thematic analysis, the study demonstrates how insurgent actors mobilize religious symbolism and political-economic resources to participate in contests over authority in contexts characterized by fragmented governance. By integrating social movement theory with scholarship on symbolic politics and insurgent governance, the paper contributes to broader debates on political Islam and the dynamics of radical Islamist mobilization.

Keywords: Boko Haram; Political Islam; Social Movement; Insurgent Governance; Symbolic Politics; Nigeria

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Introduction

Radical Islamist insurgencies have emerged as influential political actors across regions as diverse as the Sahel, the Middle East, and parts of South Asia. While doctrinal interpretations of Islam often dominate popular and policy explanations, such reductionist accounts obscure the more complex political, material, and symbolic struggles that shape these movements. Situating Nigeria within this wider global pattern, this study examines Boko Haram not simply as a doctrinally driven extremist group but as an insurgent actor engaged in a contest over legitimacy, governance, and territorial control. Understanding Boko Haram through this broader comparative lens underscores the need to reconsider how authority is contested in multi-religious polities confronted with violent non-state actors.

Examining insurgent authority is essential because groups such as Boko Haram do far more than merely deploy violence; they also seek to reorganize social, economic, and political life in the territories they penetrate. Understanding how insurgents construct and exercise authority reveals the mechanisms through which they secure compliance, mobilize support, and challenge the state's claim to legitimacy. By interrogating insurgent authority rather than treating insurgency solely as an episodic eruption of violence, scholars can better appreciate how non-state armed actors reshape patterns of political competition and influence the long-term trajectories of conflict and peace in affected societies.¹

Armed conflict around the world frequently occurs between non-state armed actors and constituted sovereign states, making political legitimacy a central site of contestation. Governance in such contexts extends beyond formal bureaucratic authority, it also involves the capacity to cultivate trust and demonstrate responsiveness to local needs. When insurgent groups provide essential services or material benefits, functions conventionally associated with the state, they may generate varying degrees of acceptance among local populations.² This dynamic suggests that ideological or theological explanations alone are insufficient for understanding insurgent endurance. Instead, it is necessary to examine how material incentives and the provision of governance goods contribute to insurgents' claims to legitimate authority.³

¹ Erica De Bruin et al., "Out-Competing Rivals: Armed Group Governance and Civilian Attitudes in Colombia," *American Political Science Review* 119, no. 4 (November 2025): 1792–1805, doi:10.1017/S0003055424000789.

² Elsa Wetter, "Legitimacy during Rebel Rule," n.d.

³ Heidi Stallman and Ryan D. Griffiths, "Legitimacy and Control: Introduction to the Special Issue on Rebel Governance," *International Politics* 62, no. 2 (April 1, 2025): 261–68, doi:10.1057/s41311-024-00567-8.

Scholars emphasize that state legitimacy rests not merely on formal sovereignty but also on the consistent and equitable delivery of basic governance goods. When the state fails to perform these functions, its political authority may erode, creating openings for non-state armed actors to expand their influence. In such contexts, insurgent groups often engage not only in violence but also in forms of institution-building, attempting to establish alternative systems of authority and, in effect, reconstitute elements of a social contract under conditions of weak or contested state governance.⁴

In Nigeria, insurgent actors are often portrayed primarily as violent challengers or terrorist organizations. However, a growing body of scholarship on rebel governance demonstrates that groups such as Boko Haram do far more than employ violence; they also attempt to govern. Their practices have included territorial control, community mobilization, and forms of ideological and symbolic governance that exploit areas of weak state capacity and limited institutional presence.⁵ In this context, insurgent authority is not merely an abstract concept but a lived reality that shapes everyday life, economic activity, and social order. For many communities in conflict-affected regions, interactions with insurgent actors influence how authority is experienced and how relationships with the state are negotiated or redefined.

In multi-religious and ethnically plural societies such as Nigeria, the risk that governance failure will lead to violent conflict increases when institutions are weak and societal cleavages become highly polarized. scholars argue that dense intercommunal civic networks, including cross-religious business associations, trade unions, and other forms of civic organization, can mitigate ethnic or religious violence by fostering interdependence and shared local interests. Where such networks are weak or absent, however, social divisions may become more easily politicized, enabling mobilization along ethnic or religious lines.⁶ In this context, ethno-religious polarization combined with weak or ineffective state institutions can provide fertile ground for political entrepreneurs. Under such conditions, insurgent movements may find opportunities to mobilize support and gain local acceptance, particularly in regions where governance failures undermine the legitimacy of state authority.

⁴ Tanya Bandula-Irwin et al., “Beyond Greed: Why Armed Groups Tax,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 47, no. 12 (December 1, 2024): 1599–1622, doi:10.1080/1057610X.2022.2038409.

⁵ “NUPI_Working_Paper_897_Hassan.Pdf,” accessed December 4, 2025, https://www.nupi.no/content/pdf_preview/24891/file/NUPI_Working_Paper_897_Hassan.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

⁶ Ashutosh Varshney, “Ethnic Conflict and Civil Society: India and Beyond,” *World Politics* 53, no. 3 (April 2001): 362–98, doi:10.1353/wp.2001.0012.

Arguably, the presence and effectiveness of insurgent governance challenge the conventional notion of the state's monopoly on legitimate authority in violence-afflicted regions of Nigeria. As insurgent groups establish systems of control and regulation, the boundaries between state and non-state governance increasingly blur. Territories affected by prolonged conflict may therefore evolve into zones of parallel authority, where civilians must navigate multiple and overlapping centers of power.⁷ In a context where state capacity has long been undermined by corruption, socioeconomic inequality, ethno-religious divisions, and regional marginalization, such dynamics create conditions in which insurgent movements can expand their influence. Under these circumstances, violent insurgency becomes not merely a product of ideological mobilization but also a manifestation of deeper structural weaknesses within the political system.

Traditionally, analyses of Islamist insurgency have emphasized theological, ideological, or doctrinal deviation as the primary motivation behind militant movements. While such interpretations remain relevant, an exclusive focus on doctrinal factors risks overlooking the broader political and economic dynamics that sustain insurgent mobilization and organizational endurance. To move beyond this reductionist perspective, scholars have increasingly drawn on analytical frameworks such as symbolic politics, fragmented authority, and rebel governance to better understand how insurgent actors construct legitimacy, mobilize support, and compete with the state for political authority.⁸

The experience of Al-Shabaab in East Africa illustrates similar dynamics of insurgent governance. The group has combined selective forms of governance with strategic bargaining with local constituencies, demonstrating that many armed movements engage in resource extraction not only for financial gain but also to cultivate legitimacy, visibility, and territorial control. Through these practices, insurgent organizations may attempt to construct quasi-state structures that regulate social and economic life within areas under their influence.⁹ This variation in governance, sometimes conciliatory and at other times coercive, suggests that the endurance of insurgent authority is often shaped less by ideology alone than by material incentives, institutional organization, and the strategic management of relations with local populations.

⁷ David Teiner, "Rebel Governance: A Vibrant Field of Research," *Zeitschrift Für Politikwissenschaft* 32, no. 3 (September 1, 2022): 747–66, doi:10.1007/s41358-022-00328-0.

⁸ Mujiono, Ticalu, C., Mawardi, K., Riyadi, S., & Zuhri, B. (2025). Islamic law and campus governance against drug abuse: Preventive strategies and restorative rehabilitation in Indonesian universities. *Global Islamic Research Journal*, 1(1), 43–58. <https://doi.org/10.65960/girj.1.1.2025.4>

⁹ Bandula-Irwin et al., "Beyond Greed."

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to examine how Boko Haram constructs and exercises authority in northeastern Nigeria. The analysis draws exclusively on secondary sources, including academic articles, books, institutional reports, conflict datasets, media investigations, and publicly available insurgent communications. The study utilizes thematic analysis following the methodological approach developed by Braun and Clarke's¹⁰ to systematically code and interpret patterns within the data. Elements of grounded theory are also incorporated to allow emergent themes to develop inductively from the sources. This methodological strategy enables the study to explore the political-economic and symbolic dimensions of insurgent authority while acknowledging the limitations inherent in reliance on secondary data.

Theoretically, the study adopts a social movement perspective to analyze radical Islamist insurgency, drawing on the framework developed by Wiktorowicz.¹¹ Rather than interpreting Islamist insurgent movements solely as manifestations of doctrinal extremism, the social movement approach conceptualizes them as collective actors that mobilize resources, construct ideological frames, and exploit political opportunities in order to compete for authority and influence within contested political environments. To deepen this perspective, the study also engages the concepts of symbolic politics and fragmented authority developed by Piscatori and Eickelman.¹² Their work demonstrates that political authority in many Muslim societies is rarely centralized. Instead, it is dispersed among multiple actors, including state institutions, religious leaders, traditional elites, and emerging social movements. Such fragmentation creates opportunities for insurgent actors to assert alternative claims to moral and political legitimacy.

Within this framework, symbolic politics highlights the role of religious language, moral claims, and symbolic practices in legitimizing authority. For insurgent movements, these symbolic resources are not merely theological expressions but strategic tools used to mobilize followers and challenge existing political orders. Boko Haram's sermons, moral policing, and appeals to justice and religious purity can therefore be interpreted as attempts to construct a competing system of legitimacy in a context where authority is already contested. By integrating the social movement perspective with the insights of symbolic politics and fragmented authority, this study conceptualizes Boko Haram as a political actor seeking to establish alternative structures of governance and legitimacy within a fragmented political landscape.

¹⁰ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (January 1, 2006): 77–101, doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

¹¹ Quintan Wiktorowicz, ed., *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, Nachdr., Indiana Series in Middle East Studies (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana Univ. Press, 2006).

¹² Eickelman and Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*.

Social Movement Theory and Radical Islamist Mobilization

Scholars increasingly analyze Islamist activism through the lens of social movement theory. This views religious movements as organized forms of collective action that mobilize supporters, construct ideological narratives, and compete for political authority. The framework demonstrates that Islamic activism can be understood using the same analytical tools applied to other political movements, emphasizing the organizational dynamics and mobilization processes that sustain collective action.¹³ Rather than interpreting Islamist movements solely as expressions of doctrinal extremism, this perspective highlights how they emerge within broader social and political environments characterized by grievances, institutional weaknesses, and opportunities for mobilization.

Social movement theory identifies several mechanisms that explain how movements emerge and persist. Among the most influential are political opportunity structures, mobilizing structures, and framing processes. Political opportunity structures refer to changes in the political environment that create openings for collective action, including state weakness, institutional instability, or elite divisions.¹⁴ When political systems fail to provide effective governance or legitimate channels for addressing grievances, movements may exploit these openings to challenge existing authority. Scholars applying social movement theory to Islamic activism argue that such opportunities often play a critical role in transforming religious networks into politically mobilized movements.

Mobilizing structures constitute the organizational networks and social infrastructures that movements rely on to recruit members and sustain participation. These structures may include mosques, religious schools, charitable organizations, informal study circles, and local community networks. Such institutions provide the logistical and social foundations necessary for mobilization, enabling movements to disseminate ideas, coordinate activities, and cultivate collective identity among supporters.¹⁵ Within Islamist movements, these networks often operate as channels through which ideological narratives and political grievances are transmitted, transforming localized religious communities into broader mobilizing constituencies.

¹³ Faisala, M. S., Karim, A., Ahmad, M., Anwer, M., Adnan, M., Hassan, M., Ahmad, K., Sohaib, H., Aziz, Q., & Liaqat, M. (2025). The Prophetic Sunnah and the challenges of the age: Confronting technology and its effects on social and psychological security. *Global Islamic Research Journal*, 1(1), 22–42. <https://doi.org/10.65960/girj.1.1.2025.5>

¹⁴ Moh Susilo, “‘Visit My Mosque’: Exploring Religious Activism to Help Tackle Islamophobia and Negative Perceptions of Muslims in Britain,” n.d.

¹⁵ Timothy Kraner, “AL QAEDA IN IRAQ: DEMOBILIZING THE THREAT” (NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL, 2005).

Another key element is framing processes. These refer to the ways movements interpret social conditions and communicate these interpretations to potential followers. Framing involves constructing persuasive narratives that define problems, assign responsibility, and propose solutions. In the context of Islamist activism, framing frequently draws upon religious language, moral symbolism, and narratives of justice or purification to legitimize political claims.¹⁶ These symbolic interpretations help transform social grievances into collective action by providing followers with a coherent explanation of their circumstances and a moral justification for mobilization.

Together, these mechanisms illustrate how Islamist movements function not merely as religious expressions but also as strategic actors operating within complex political environments. By mobilizing organizational networks, exploiting political opportunities, and constructing persuasive ideological frames, such movements can transform localized grievances into sustained political contention. Applying this framework to radical Islamist insurgencies allows scholars to move beyond doctrinal explanations and instead analyze how insurgent groups mobilize supporters, construct legitimacy, and compete with state institutions for authority within contested governance landscapes.

These analytical mechanisms are particularly useful for understanding the emergence and evolution of insurgent movements in contexts where governance is weak and legitimacy is contested. In northern Nigeria, longstanding socioeconomic marginalization, political instability, and religious polarization created conditions that could be exploited by emerging Islamist movements. Within such an environment, networks of religious activism, charismatic leadership, and narratives of moral reform provided the foundations for mobilization. Examining the rise of Boko Haram through the lens of social movement theory therefore reveals how the group evolved from a localized religious movement into a violent insurgency capable of contesting state authority. The following section traces the historical development of Boko Haram in Nigeria and demonstrates how this social movement dynamics contributed to the formation and expansion of the group.

¹⁶ Helen Mu Hung Ting and Tobi Angel Kolawole, "COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE ISLAMISATION PROCESS IN MALAYSIA AND NIGERIA: A SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORY APPROACH," *Journal of International Studies* 20, no. 1 (May 12, 2024): 149–76, doi:10.32890/jis2024.20.1.6.

Historical Context of Boko Haram's Emergence in Nigeria

Historically, Nigeria has experienced persistent religious tensions, particularly in its northern regions where political authority and religious identity have long intersected.¹⁷ Many of these tensions can be traced to the colonial institutionalization of governance along ethnic and religious lines, a legacy that shaped patterns of political competition both before and after independence. The consequences of this structure became increasingly visible in the decades following independence, as episodes of religious and communal violence drew both national and international attention. One of the most significant manifestations of these tensions emerged during the constitutional debates of April 1978, when political actors fiercely contested whether Nigeria should be formally defined as a secular state or incorporate elements of a Sharia-based legal order.¹⁸

The debate, largely structured along regional and religious lines, exposed deep disagreements about the moral foundations of political authority and left unresolved tensions regarding the appropriate role of religion in governance.¹⁹ Such conditions reflect what is described as fragmented authority where multiple actors compete to define legitimate rule. In Nigeria, these tensions resurfaced prominently in the early 2000s when several northern states adopted Sharia-based legal systems. By 2002, twelve states had introduced Islamic criminal law alongside the federal constitutional framework, generating intense political debate and social controversy. Critics argued that the institutionalization of Sharia within a formally secular federation created a form of parallel legal order, raising concerns about constitutional consistency, minority rights, and the broader implications for national cohesion.²⁰

The movement that later became Boko Haram initially emerged in the mid-1990s as a small religious organization reportedly founded by Mallam Lawal under the name Muslim Youth Organization. In its early phase, the group functioned primarily as a Salafi-oriented religious movement that attracted followers through preaching and Islamic study circles. A significant turning point

¹⁷ Matthews A. Ojo and Folaranmi T. Lateju, "Christian–Muslim Conflicts and Interfaith Bridge-Building Efforts in Nigeria," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 8, no. 1 (January 1, 2010): 31–38, doi:10.1080/15570271003707762.

¹⁸ Toyin Falola, *Violence in Nigeria: The Crisis of Religious Politics and Secular Ideologies* (University Rochester Press, 1998), 1–5.

¹⁹ Mustafa, A., Ishaque, M., Raza, R., Samiullah, & Raza, M. I. (2025). When culture meets Fiqh: Examining the legal authority of 'Urf in contemporary engagement traditions. *Global Islamic Research Journal*, 1(1), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.65960/girj.1.1.2025.6>

²⁰ Kenneth Omeje, *Peacebuilding in Contemporary Africa: In Search of Alternative Strategies* (Routledge, 2018), 2011.

occurred when Mohammed Yusuf assumed leadership in the early 2000s and reorganized the movement into a more structured religious community centered in Borno State. Yusuf's leadership expanded the group's influence through preaching networks, religious education, and engagement with local political actors, particularly during the administration of Ali Modu Sheriff. Although the movement initially presented itself as a reformist Islamic community advocating the implementation of stricter religious norms, tensions gradually emerged between the group and political authorities. Disagreements over financial arrangements, governance practices, and ideological commitments contributed to the deterioration of this relationship.²¹

These tensions culminated in the violent confrontations of July 2009 which marked a decisive turning point in the group's trajectory, transforming it from a localized religious movement into a militant insurgent organization that would later gain international recognition as a terrorist group. In the words of Mohammed Yusuf, the movement sought to establish an Islamic state and replace Nigeria's democratic system, which he condemned as a political order rooted in Western ideological influence.²² Such statements highlight the explicitly political dimension of the movement's objectives and underscore that Boko Haram's agenda extended beyond religious reform to include the transformation of the Nigerian state.

Armed conflict and insurgency often flourish in environments where poverty, weak governance, and institutional fragility converge. Under such conditions, insurgent activity may evolve from episodic violence into more entrenched forms of authority that operate alongside, and sometimes in competition with, formal state institutions. The consequences of this transformation are far-reaching, including the erosion of human rights protections, disruptions to social order, and constraints on economic opportunity. As insurgent authority becomes normalized within affected communities, efforts to reestablish effective state institutions may encounter significant resistance and mistrust, thereby perpetuating cycles of instability, displacement, and humanitarian crisis. These dynamics suggest that security-centered responses alone are insufficient. Rather, understanding and addressing insurgency requires a broader analytical framework that considers governance failures, political legitimacy, and institutional reform.

²¹ "BOKO-HARAM-A-RELIGIOUS-SECT-OR-TERRORIST-ORGANIZATION," n.d.

²² Al Azhari, F. U., Shah, S. H. M., Al Azhari, S. I., Rasool, F., Ahmed, R., Samad, A., & Rehman, A. (2025). The role of Islamic economic principles in family law: A study on inheritance and property rights within the context of child protection. *Global Islamic Research Journal*, 1(1), 59–76. <https://doi.org/10.65960/girj.1.1.2025.2>

Dynamics of Insurgent Authority and Rebel Governance in North-Eastern Nigeria

❖ Fluidity of State Legitimacy: Boko Haram as an Opportunist

Although Nigeria cannot be formally classified as a failed state, persistent governance deficits including limited state capacity, uneven provision of basic public services, and challenges in maintaining a monopoly over the legitimate use of force have created openings for non-state armed actors such as Boko Haram to politicize their struggle. In contexts where state authority is fragmented, insurgent groups are often able to exploit legitimacy gaps and position themselves as alternative providers of order or justice.²³ In northeastern Nigeria, Boko Haram leveraged these structural weaknesses, along with entrenched poverty and socio-economic marginalization to expand its influence among vulnerable communities. By capitalizing on existing political fragmentation and engaging opportunistically with local political actors, the group gradually transformed itself from a marginal religious movement into a recognized insurgent force within the region.

While Islamic fundamentalist ideas may have initially informed the establishment of Boko Haram originally known as the Yusufiyah movement,²⁴ the group later evolved into Jama'atu Ahlus Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (The Sunni Community for the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad), an organization associated with strict Salafi interpretations emphasizing religious purification and moral reform. However, the movement's transformation into a violent insurgency cannot be explained solely through doctrinal motivations. Rather, its radicalization was significantly shaped by the governance vacuum created by persistent state neglect, weak institutions, and socio-economic marginalization in northeastern Nigeria. In this context, religious discourse functioned not merely as theology but as a powerful mobilizing frame.²⁵ As Jeffrey Seul (1999) argues, so-called religious conflicts are rarely driven by religion alone, instead, religious narratives often serve as symbolic frameworks

²³ Marc-Antoine Pérouse De Montclos, ed., *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria* (IFRA-Nigeria, 2014), 148–55, doi:10.4000/books.ifra.1703.

²⁴ Zahra, R., Qasim, M., Ali, M., Asef, J., & Ali, B. (2025). Addressing mental health stigma and digital harassment in Pakistan and Indonesia: Insights from Islamic principles and AI-driven cybersecurity law. *Global Islamic Research Journal*, 1(1), 77–92. <https://doi.org/10.65960/girj.1.1.2025.1>

²⁵ Osaretin Idahosa, "Boko Haram and the Nigerian State: A Different Perspective," *Glocalism: Journal of Culture, Politics and Innovation*, no. 3 (November 30, 2015), doi:10.12893/gjpci.2015.3.5.

through which political grievances, identity struggles, and institutional failures are articulated.²⁶

Nigeria's escalating security expenditures further illustrate the challenges of translating state capacity into effective governance outcomes. In 2014, the country allocated approximately one trillion naira (about USD 6.25 billion) to security spending, a figure that has expanded dramatically to about 6.57 trillion naira by 2025 according to reports by BudgIT. Despite this substantial increase, persistent concerns regarding corruption, weak oversight, and limited accountability within the security sector have undermined the effectiveness of these investments. Allegations of financial mismanagement involving military and paramilitary officials, often in conjunction with political elites, have contributed to public skepticism regarding the state's commitment and capacity to address insecurity.²⁷ In such circumstances, the expansion of security budgets alone does not necessarily translate into improved security outcomes. Instead, weak institutional accountability and poor resource management may erode public trust in state institutions, thereby reinforcing the legitimacy gaps that insurgent actors can exploit.

Several scholars have argued that the Boko Haram insurgency cannot be understood solely through religious explanations. For example, Adeyemo (2011) contends that the movement is as much a political phenomenon as it is a religious one.²⁸ Similar concerns have been echoed by prominent religious leaders, including Alaba Job, former president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, who suggested that political dynamics play a significant role in sustaining the insurgency. Analysts have also pointed to allegations that segments of the political elite may have indirectly enabled insurgent activities through patronage networks, financial diversion, or the manipulation of local grievances for political advantage. Closely related to these concerns are broader patterns of corruption and resource diversion by public officials, which continue to widen socio-economic inequalities across the country. Such conditions contribute to widespread public frustration and can create fertile ground for the appeal of radical movements that promise alternative systems of justice or governance.²⁹ Furthermore, some studies indicate that portions of Boko Haram's operational

²⁶ Daniel Egiegba Agbiboa, "NO RETREAT, NO SURRENDER: UNDERSTANDING THE RELIGIOUS TERRORISM OF BOKO HARAM IN NIGERIA," n.d.

²⁷ Hasanah, L. N., Faisal, M. S., Ahmed, Z., & Hasyim, M. Y. A. (2025). Religious diversity and the digital economy: Legal-academic pathways to harmonize Sharia and international law. *International Journal of Law and Social Sciences*, 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.65960/ijlss.1.1.2025.8>

²⁸ Alafuro Epelle and Iwarimie B. Uranta, "Political Economy of Violence: Interpreting the Nigerian Boko Haram," *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, July 1, 2014, doi:10.5901/mjss.2014.v5n10p528.

²⁹ Efehi OKORO, "Ife Social Sciences Review The Political Economy of Terrorism: A Comparative Analysis of Boko Haram and the Islamic State" 28 (October 26, 2020): 88–104.

capacity have been supplemented by fighters recruited from neighboring countries such as Niger and Chad, reflecting the transnational dynamics of insurgent mobilization in the Lake Chad region.³⁰

Taken together, these dynamics illustrate how insurgent movements often emerge and expand within environments where state legitimacy is contested and institutional authority is unevenly exercised. Governance deficits, corruption, socio-economic marginalization, and political competition create conditions in which insurgent actors can present themselves as viable alternatives to the state. In northeastern Nigeria, Boko Haram's expansion reflects not only ideological mobilization but also its ability to exploit these structural vulnerabilities and legitimacy gaps. Such conditions reinforce the argument that insurgency is deeply embedded in political and institutional contexts rather than driven solely by doctrinal motivations. However, beyond exploiting governance failures, insurgent movements must also construct narratives that justify their authority and mobilize followers. Understanding how Boko Haram articulates these claims requires examining the symbolic and ideological frameworks through which the group legitimizes its actions and authority.

Symbolic Politics: Boko Haram's Construction of Insurgent Legitimacy

Claims to authority in insurgent movements rely not only on coercive force but also on a deliberate politics of symbolism through which groups seek to embed their struggles within morally resonant frameworks. In the case of Boko Haram, insurgent legitimacy is constructed through symbolic practices that situate the movement within what it presents as the authentic moral universe of Islam. Drawing on the notion of symbolic politics developed by James Piscatori and Dale F. Eickelman, Boko Haram mobilizes a repertoire of religious symbols including scriptural references, prophetic imagery, discourses of religious purity, martyrdom, and ritualized piety, portraying itself as the guardian of a divinely sanctioned political order. These symbolic interventions, as will be discussed shortly, operate not merely as theological expressions but as strategic tools for legitimizing insurgent authority and mobilizing followers.

Qur'anic Language: Boko Haram frequently invokes the concept of *jihad* in order to anchor its activities within the language of Islamic scripture. In public statements and propaganda, the group frames its insurgency not as rebellion against the state but as obedience to a divinely sanctioned command. For

³⁰ Daniel C. Chukwurah, Eme Okechukwu, and Eunice Nmire Ogbeje, "Implication of Boko Haram Terrorism on Northern Nigeria," *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, May 1, 2015, doi:10.5901/mjss.2015.v6n3p371.

instance, Abubakar Shekau declared: “We are engaged in jihad because Allah has commanded us to fight against the system that rules by other than what He has revealed.”³¹ Through such rhetoric, the movement seeks to fuse militant action with religious obligation, thereby transforming socio-political grievances into what appears as a scripturally mandated struggle.³² At the same time, it is important to note that the concept of *jihad* possesses a well-developed jurisprudential tradition within Islamic thought. Boko Haram’s interpretation therefore reflects a broader symbolic appropriation of Islamic concepts in order to legitimize its insurgent project.

Prophetic Symbolism: Prophetic imagery constitutes another important pillar of Boko Haram’s legitimacy claims. The movement frequently frames its struggle as a continuation of the mission of Muhammad, presenting its project as part of a broader effort to restore moral order and religious authenticity. By invoking the formative period of early Islam, the group constructs a narrative in which its insurgency appears as a sacred reenactment of the Prophet’s struggle against perceived injustice and impiety.³³ Such symbolic framing allows the movement to situate contemporary political conflict within historical template. More broadly, this strategy reflects a common pattern in insurgent movements, where references to idealized historical figures serve to create a sense of moral continuity and divine sanction for present political action.

Purity and Moral Cleansing: Discourses of purity and moral cleansing feature prominently in Boko Haram’s sermons and public messaging, where social reform is framed as the removal of moral and religious corruption from society. In the words attributed to Mohammed Yusuf, “our communities have been corrupted by Western influences, and all believers must purify themselves spiritually and socially even in the face of persecution.” Through such rhetoric, the movement constructs a narrative in which contemporary Nigerian society is depicted as spiritually contaminated by secular governance, Western education, and perceived moral decadence. By presenting its campaign as a process of purification, Boko Haram symbolically reinterprets violence as an act of moral

³¹ Mujiono, & Ticalu, C. (2025). Emerging trends in law and social sciences: Global perspectives on policy, ethics, justice, and institutional reform. *International Journal of Law and Social Sciences*, 1(1), 40–60. <https://doi.org/10.65960/ijlss.1.1.2025.6>

³² Ismael Funsho Yusuph, Taofeeq Abolaji Abdulraheem, and Abdurrozaq Opeyemi Abdulazeez, “Decoupling Jihad from Boko-Haram Insurgency: A Critical Analysis of Misconceptions and Realities in Nigeria,” *Mazahibuna: Jurnal Perbandingan Mazhab*, March 4, 2025, 1–18, doi:10.24252/mazahibuna.vi.55536.

³³ Azhari, A. M., Azhari, S., & Yaqooq, M. I. (2025). Global transformations in law, justice, and society: Comparative perspectives on governance, rights, and legal reform. *International Journal of Law and Social Sciences*, 1(1), 60–90. <https://doi.org/10.65960/ijlss.1.1.2025.7>

restoration.³⁴ This moralizing language thus reframes the insurgency not merely as a reaction to political or governance failures but as a divinely sanctioned effort to cleanse society and reestablish an authentic Islamic order.³⁵

Theme of Martyrdom: Martyrdom constitutes another central symbolic theme in Boko Haram's ideological communication, where death in battle is framed as a spiritually transcendent act. The group's propaganda frequently portrays fighters who die in combat as *shuhada'* (martyrs) who have attained the highest spiritual reward and eternal bliss in Paradise. Such narratives transform violent sacrifice into a symbol of supreme piety and devotion to the divine cause. By sanctifying death in this manner, Boko Haram provides theological justification for acts of violence and also strengthens internal cohesion and recruitment.³⁶ The glorification of martyrdom offers participants a moral and spiritual framework through which suffering and death are reinterpreted as honorable pathways to divine favor, reinforcing the perception that participation in the insurgency carries sacred significance.

Islamic Rites and Practices: Islamic ritual practices also function as an important symbolic resource within Boko Haram's ideological framework. The movement integrates acts such as prayer (*ṣalāh*) and fasting (*ṣawm*) into its collective identity, deliberately blurring the boundary between personal devotion and militant affiliation.³⁷ Fighters are often depicted in propaganda materials praying before operations, while leaders emphasize that ritual observance serves both as a source of spiritual strength and as a marker of belonging within the movement. Through this symbolic incorporation of religious rites, Boko Haram transforms routine acts of worship into expressions of political loyalty. In this way, sacred practices are reframed as visible affirmations of insurgent commitment and instruments through which the group consolidates its claim to moral and religious authority.

³⁴ Kyari Mohammed, "The Message and Methods of Boko Haram," in *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria*, ed. Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, WAPOS Series (Ibadan: IFRA-Nigeria, 2014), 9–32, doi:10.4000/books.ifra.1753.

³⁵ "The Theory and Reality of Boko Haram," accessed December 12, 2025, <https://institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/theory-and-reality-boko-haram>.

³⁶ Jonathan Matusitz and Doris Wesley, "Case Study: Boko Haram's Digital Media," in *Jihad in Sub-Saharan Africa: The Role of Digital Media*, ed. Jonathan Matusitz and Doris Wesley (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024), 179–208, doi:10.1007/978-3-031-53700-4_7.

³⁷ Ibid.

Simply put, these religious and moral symbolic strategies illustrate how Boko Haram constructs and contests legitimacy in an environment marked by state weakness and social dislocation. Viewed through the lens of symbolic politics, the group's manipulation of religious symbols becomes a mechanism for political legitimation, enabling it to project theological authority and assert claims to governance.³⁸ These symbolic strategies underscore that Boko Haram's insurgency is not merely a manifestation of doctrinal extremism but a calculated project of political legitimation. Through the strategic deployment of religious imagery, scriptural language, and ritual practice, the movement constructs a moral universe in which its authority appears both divinely sanctioned and socially necessary, thereby reinforcing its broader claim to insurgent governance in northeastern Nigeria.

Insurgent Governance and Political Economy: Coercion, Consent, and Resource Control

Boko Haram's authority is not sustained by symbolic claims alone; the gradual development of governing practices that substitute for, compete with, or exploit absent state institutions represents another critical source of influence. It is therefore not coincidental that insurgent strongholds are concentrated in parts of northeastern Nigeria where state presence remains weak or episodic.³⁹ In such environments, Boko Haram is able to translate symbolic legitimacy into practical authority, embedding its presence within the everyday lives of civilians. Insurgent governance often emerges not solely from ideological ambition but from pragmatic responses to the challenges of territorial control and population management.⁴⁰

Civilian compliance under Boko Haram rule is best understood as negotiated rather than absolute, as civilians often comply with insurgent demands out of pragmatic calculation rather than ideological commitment.⁴¹ Communities may cooperate to avoid violence, protect livelihoods, or secure a degree of stability,

³⁸ Al-Farjani, S. H., Ahmad, T., & Rana, H. A. S. (2025). Digital innovation, legal reform, and social justice: Interdisciplinary approaches to law, technology, and human rights. *International Journal of Law and Social Sciences*, 1(1), 91–129. <https://doi.org/10.65960/ijlss.1.1.2025.5>

³⁹ Zachariah Mampilly and Megan A. Stewart, "A Typology of Rebel Political Institutional Arrangements," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 65, no. 1 (2021): 15–45.

⁴⁰ Ana Arjona, Nelson Kasfir, and Zachariah Mampilly, *Rebel Governance in Civil War* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁴¹ "Terror, Territory, and Targets: Theorizing Terrorist Group Target Selection in Iraq, 2012-2016 - ProQuest," accessed December 13, 2025, <https://www.proquest.com/openview/9cedaab46b21dd30caf981dc7a706276/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>.

even while privately rejecting insurgent ideology.⁴² This dynamic reflects what Eickelman and Piscatori describe as fragmented authority, in which legitimacy is situational, layered, and contingent rather than total. Boko Haram's authority therefore fluctuates according to its ability to balance coercion with limited responsiveness to local grievances.

Importantly, Boko Haram has demonstrated adaptive flexibility in its governance practices, challenging portrayals of the group as rigidly dogmatic. Evidence from northeastern Nigeria indicates that insurgents have adjusted taxation levels, negotiated exemptions, delayed punishments, and modified behavioral regulations in response to civilian resistance or economic pressures.⁴³ Such adaptations suggest that survival and territorial control often outweigh strict ideological enforcement. This pragmatism reinforces the argument that Boko Haram's authority is fundamentally political: while religious symbolism provides justification, governance practices are ultimately shaped by strategic calculation.

Nevertheless, insurgent governance under Boko Haram remains deeply coercive and inherently unstable. Compliance is frequently secured through violence, intimidation, and exemplary punishment, limiting the depth and durability of insurgent legitimacy. Civilian resistance, defection, intelligence sharing with state forces, and internal fragmentation—particularly between Boko Haram and its offshoot, ISWAP—further expose the fragility of insurgent authority. Studies have consistently shown that insurgent governance tends to collapse when coercion outweighs perceived benefits or when alternative authorities re-emerge. Boko Haram's rule therefore represents not an alternative social contract but a contingent and contested form of authority sustained within a fractured and multilayered political landscape. Yet, coercion alone cannot sustain insurgent rule. Like many rebel administrations, Boko Haram's authority also depends on the economic structures that finance its operations and regulate civilian livelihoods.

Beyond administrative practices and negotiated compliance, Boko Haram's authority is also sustained by the political economy that underpins insurgent survival. Governance in rebel-held territories is inseparable from the ability to extract, redistribute, and control resources. As scholars of rebel governance note, insurgent groups that maintain territorial influence must develop economic

⁴² Anneli Botha and Mahdi Abdile, "Reality Versus Perception: Toward Understanding Boko Haram in Nigeria," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, no. 5 (May 4, 2019): 493–519, doi:10.1080/1057610X.2018.1403152.

⁴³ Alexander Thurston, "Boko Haram : The History of an African Jihadist Movement," 2017, 1–352.

systems capable of financing military operations while regulating civilian economic activity. In northeastern Nigeria, long-standing underdevelopment, insecurity, and weak state institutions have created economic conditions in which Boko Haram can embed itself within local markets and informal economies, transforming resource extraction into a central pillar of insurgent authority.

Boko Haram's persistence is closely tied to the political economy that underwrites its insurgency. Rather than operating solely as an ideologically driven movement, the group has developed revenue-generating mechanisms that enable territorial control, recruitment, and governance. Scholarship on rebel governance emphasizes that insurgent authority depends on the capacity to extract and manage resources in areas of weak state presence.⁴⁴ In northeastern Nigeria, long-standing underdevelopment and insecurity have created economic conditions in which armed groups can substitute for absent or ineffective state institutions.

Territorial control further enables access to cross-border trade and informal economies in the Lake Chad Basin. By exploiting the porous borders linking Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, Boko Haram is able to tax livestock movements, smuggling networks, and commercial transport.⁴⁵ Insurgent violence frequently clusters around economically strategic locations, underscoring how resource control shapes patterns of expansion and conflict. Material incentives also play a significant role in recruitment and retention, as economic vulnerability often drives participation in insurgent groups. Boko Haram offers salaries, food security, and access to looted resources to attract fighters, particularly among displaced and unemployed youth. In such contexts, immediate survival often outweighs doctrinal motivation.⁴⁶

Boko Haram's governance practices and political economy reveal that insurgent authority in northeastern Nigeria is neither purely ideological nor exclusively coercive. Rather, it emerges from a combination of symbolic legitimation, pragmatic governance, and resource extraction that enables the group to embed itself within fractured local political and economic landscapes. By regulating everyday life, taxing economic activity, and selectively responding to civilian pressures, Boko Haram converts territorial presence into a form of contingent authority. Yet this authority remains inherently unstable. Its reliance on coercion, economic predation, and fragile civilian compliance limits the durability of insurgent rule and exposes it to collapse when state institutions

⁴⁴ Mampilly and Stewart, "A Typology of Rebel Political Institutional Arrangements."

⁴⁵ Ana Arjona, Nelson Kasfir, and Zachariah Mampilly, *Rebel Governance in Civil War* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 74–97.

⁴⁶ Al Azhari, F. U., & Al Azhari, S. I. (2025). Contemporary challenges in harmonizing Sharia, national legal systems, and international law in a rapidly changing world. *International Journal of Law and Social Sciences*, 1(1), 130–150. <https://doi.org/10.65960/ijlss.1.1.2025.4>

reassert themselves or when civilian cooperation erodes. Boko Haram's insurgency therefore illustrates how armed groups operating in contexts of state weakness construct provisional systems of governance that both sustain and constrain their claims to political legitimacy.

Conclusion

This study has examined radical Islamist insurgency in Nigeria by challenging doctrinal explanations that portray Boko Haram primarily as a product of theological extremism. Instead, the analysis demonstrates that Boko Haram's emergence and persistence are better understood as part of a broader struggle over legitimacy, authority, and material control within a fragmented political environment. By situating the insurgency within Nigeria's historical, socio-economic, and institutional context, the study shows that Boko Haram operates not merely as a religious movement but as a strategic political actor engaged in contesting the state's capacity to govern in regions characterized by weak institutional presence. Drawing on social movement theory, the paper highlights how Boko Haram mobilizes supporters through mechanisms commonly associated with collective political action. Political opportunity structures created by governance failures, institutional weakness, and socio-economic marginalization have provided openings that the movement has exploited to expand its influence. At the same time, mobilizing structures rooted in religious networks, charismatic leadership, and community-level institutions have facilitated recruitment and organizational cohesion. Through framing processes that invoke religious symbolism, moral purification, and narratives of injustice, Boko Haram has transformed localized grievances into a broader ideological project that seeks to legitimize its insurgent activities and challenge existing political authority.

The analysis further demonstrates that Boko Haram's authority is constructed through a combination of symbolic politics and practical governance. By invoking Qur'anic language, prophetic symbolism, themes of martyrdom, and ritual practices, the movement frames its insurgency within a moral universe that portrays violent struggle as a divinely sanctioned obligation. These symbolic strategies allow Boko Haram to reinterpret political conflict in religious terms, thereby strengthening internal cohesion and legitimizing its challenge to the Nigerian state. However, symbolic legitimacy alone is insufficient to sustain insurgent authority. As scholarship on rebel governance suggests, insurgent movements must also establish systems of control and regulation in the territories they influence. In northeastern Nigeria, Boko Haram has attempted to translate symbolic legitimacy into practical authority through forms of insurgent governance and resource extraction. By regulating everyday

life, taxing economic activities, and exploiting cross-border trade networks in the Lake Chad Basin, the group has embedded itself within local political and economic landscapes. Civilian compliance within these territories often reflects pragmatic negotiation rather than ideological commitment, illustrating the fragmented and situational nature of authority in conflict environments. Yet the study also shows that insurgent governance remains deeply unstable. Its reliance on coercion, economic predation, and fragile civilian compliance limits the durability of insurgent rule and exposes it to erosion when state institutions regain capacity or when civilian cooperation declines.

Taken together, these findings suggest that Boko Haram should be understood not simply as a terrorist organization or doctrinally motivated extremist movement, but as an insurgent actor operating within a broader field of political competition. By mobilizing religious symbolism, exploiting political opportunities, constructing governance practices, and developing resource extraction systems, the movement participates in ongoing struggles over authority in regions where the state's legitimacy and institutional capacity remain contested. More broadly, the study contributes to debates on political Islam and insurgent mobilization by demonstrating the value of integrating social movement theory with scholarship on symbolic politics and rebel governance. Such an approach reveals how insurgent groups simultaneously function as ideological movements, political organizations, and alternative governing authorities within fragmented political landscapes. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing more comprehensive responses to insurgency, as military solutions alone cannot address the underlying governance failures, socio-economic grievances, and legitimacy deficits that enable such movements to endure.

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